

Northport Leland Township Utility Authority Wastewater Treatment Facility Site Access

Introduction

The Wastewater Treatment Facility serving the Northport area is a publicly owned treatment works. The Northport Leland Township Utility Authority's (NLTUA) intends to make the facility accessible to students, community members, and others interested in its operation. Simultaneously, NTLUA and the plant operator are obligated to keep the plant secure and visitors safe from hazard or injury.

Generally the plant site is fenced, gated, and locked; and buildings within the site are locked. Members of NLTUA will have access keys, as will the plant operator. The operator may leave the gate or buildings within the compound unlocked while working at the facility, but will re-secure the site upon departing.

The guidelines below identify practices intended to meet NLTUA's access objectives while hosting visitors at the treatment plant:

Community Members

NLTUA and the plant operator intend to accommodate any members of the public interested in seeing or learning about the treatment plant. It can be time-intensive however to give plant tours to individuals. The operator may take contact information from the inquirer and call back when a small group can be formed for a guided visit.

Class or Group Tours

Tours of the facility can be informative to biology and general science students. The treatment processes at the facility utilize and illustrate many science principles. A tour will also raise awareness about community issues relating to protecting the watershed, the environment, and public health. Class or group tours should be scheduled well in advance and are best conducted in warm seasons of the year since there is no indoor space at the plant where a group can assemble for discussion. Tours are offered to students in grades 6 to 12, college students, and the public. The operator of the facility has offered to make presentations at elementary schools so our youngest citizens can learn about treatment in a safe environment with age-effective presentation materials.

Before the tour

- Participants meet at the facility control building,
- Sign the visitor log and count heads,
- Hear safety briefing and receive safety glasses,
- Review process schematic and site map.

During the tour

- Stops will be made at each process area beginning with the headworks. The tour will follow the same path that the wastewater follows as it is processed.
- Questions will be taken at each stop along the way.

After the tour

- Count the attendees and make sure no one was left behind.
- Return safety glasses and wash hands.

Vendors

Vendors and contractors are asked to contact the plant operator or the NLTUA members for an appointment to visit. The plant is not continuously staffed and drop-in visits are not possible. Vendor's or contractor's reason for visiting might involve work on or around equipment. When that is the case, the visitor will be required to comply with safety practices established for the site. The plant operator will brief the visitor on safety requirements.

Safety Considerations for all Visitors

- All visitors must be accompanied by a representative of the utility authority or the plant operator.
- Parking is generally restricted to the lower level of the facility.
- Safety glasses are required.
- Shoes with closed toes are required. No sandals or flip-flops.
- This is a wastewater treatment facility. All equipment on location may have been exposed to wastewater. Visitors should minimize contact with equipment. Human pathogens may be present
- Visitors can expect to walk up the steep driveway to view the treatment areas and must stay on the roadway and graveled areas. There are many steep slopes at the facility not designed for walking.
- Bees like treatment plants. Allergic visitors should be alert.
- The facility control building is handicapped accessible. The rest of the compound is not. A NLTUA or operator's representative can provide a tour in a vehicle by pre-arrangement.



Tips for outstanding plant tours

For the public, what happens to wastewater after they flush the toilet or how clean water gets delivered to their tap is a mystery and rarely piques curiosity.

People typically pay no attention to the intricate system at work under their streets or to the important processes taking place at the community plant.

But inviting the public and schoolchildren to tour your plant is a great way to bridge that gap in knowledge, spark some curiosity and conduct important public relations at the same time.

Our associates have collectively hosted hundreds of tours for school groups, scout troops and the general public. For those of you beginning to offer tours, some simple pre-event planning can make the visit entertaining, exciting and educational.

Putting together a great tour

If you don't already have a tour program in place, it's easy to start one. First, do a little brainstorming:

- What are the days and hours you're available for tours?
- What ages do you want to target? Suggested ages are students in grades 6 to 12 and college students.
- Plan the tour in advance, and develop the path the tour will take.
- Work with your staff to understand who is interested in conducting tours.
- Determine if you will need safety and/or photo releases from tour participants.
- Obtain permission from the client if necessary. At minimum, notify them of your plans.

Once you have these ideas in place, let your community know that your facility is available for tours. Develop a flier with basic information about your locations, hours, what you do and more. Contact local schools – the science club sponsor or career counselor is a great place to start. You also can post tour information on the city's Web site.

When a teacher contacts you, explain what to expect on a tour and what's needed, such as sturdy shoes and

weather-appropriate clothing. Also, determine how many students and chaperones will attend. Tours work best with no more than 15-20 people per group. If an entire class or grade is coming, make sure you have enough staff to split them into smaller groups so each person can hear and see what you're explaining.

Before the tour group arrives, be sure your facility is clean and prepared. Have enough safety materials – such as goggles, gloves and hats – available to distribute, and remove obvious hazards or mark them if they are not removable. When the group arrives, start by outlining the safety rules and explain how to use the safety materials. Then you're ready to begin the tour.

What to say along the way

As you tour the facility, explain the importance of water conservation, the role your facility plays and the status of the infrastructure in your area. Obviously, you don't want to be heavy-handed in your approach, but relevant topics can be mentioned at different parts of the tour. Test the group's knowledge of basic terms prior to starting so you can adjust and define your terminology as needed.

And for wastewater plants, the "yuck factor" is both a draw and deterrent for visitors. For that reason, it is best to be upfront and deal with it directly. A lively question-and-answer session before arriving at the bar screen, or once there, can entertain the students while educating them. Ask them what items they

think are found in wastewater. Wrap up the session with a reminder that toilets, drains and storm sewers are not trash cans.

At the end of the tour, don't forget to thank everyone for coming. If possible, have a staff member or teacher take pictures of the group. You may want to consider starting a "Wall of Fame" that includes a photo from each of your tours with the date, school and names of employees who conducted and helped on the tour.

If possible, have materials available that visitors can take home that reinforce the message of the work you do. List contact information for the public works department and your facility in particular.

Overall, conducting tours provides a great community relations opportunity. It sheds light on an often misunderstood process that happens without any fanfare, and helps bring more awareness and knowledge to citizens. People can see very visibly and undeniably the importance of their community's water and wastewater plants and how they protect the watershed, the environment and public health.

Our thanks to Carol Stream, Ill., Project Manager Mike Burnett and Gilroy, Calif., Project Manager Brenda Miles, who wrote this article. A longer version is scheduled to appear in the August issue of Water Environment and Technology published by Water Environment Federation. The article will be featured in the Operations Forum section.

Simple tips for successful visits

- Inform visitors prior to the tour to wear proper shoes and weather-appropriate clothing.
- Explain safety rules at the beginning of the visit and reinforce them throughout.
- Have plenty of safety equipment for visitors, such as hats, gloves and goggles.
- Be aware of "lingo" usage; explain industry terms clearly and simply.
- Use comparisons to common activities to help people understand how a process works.
- Practice by walking the tour personally before conducting one.
- Keep a cheat sheet with you about items such as tank sizes and depth.
- Thank everyone for coming!